



Differences Between Acute and Chronic Hepatitis C

By Peter Jaret

CONSUMER HEALTH INTERACTIVE

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The difference is a matter of time. An acute infection occurs soon after someone is exposed to a germ, such as the hepatitis C virus (HCV). If the immune system is unable to fight off the infection, the disease becomes chronic.

What are the symptoms of acute hepatitis?

The onset of acute hepatitis C is usually silent, but may be marked by malaise, nausea, and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

In about 15 percent of HCV infections, the immune system successfully eliminates the virus and patients fully recover. In the other 85 percent, the virus persists. However, people who have a chronic infection may live for years without experiencing any symptoms at all. Severe complications and death from the infection usually only overtake those who also develop cirrhosis. (This occurs in 15 to 20 percent of people with chronic hepatitis C.)

How is chronic hepatitis diagnosed?

Doctors typically diagnose chronic hepatitis when blood tests show active virus and elevated liver enzymes for longer than six months. Chronic infections are dangerous because the virus can continue to invade and destroy liver cells. Often the immune system's unsuccessful attempts to get rid of the virus cause unintended damage to nearby tissues.

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